

Tracking the Economic Effects of Military Base Closures: Three Cases

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Abstract

In October 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis urged Congress to grant him authority to reduce the department's overhead. Even if the military were to grow back to the levels seen when the United States was actively fighting wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq (in 2012), the DoD had concluded that it would still be carrying nearly 20 percent excess base capacity.

Congress, however, refused to grant Mattis's request – just as it had rejected similar pleas from four previous Secretaries of Defense. Instead, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) included language requiring DoD to complete another infrastructure review, effectively delaying any possible future round of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) until 2021, at the earliest.

Congressional leaders have denied DoD the authority to close unneeded bases, in part, due to concern that such actions would do irreparable harm to local economies – and despite that fact that empirical studies show that most areas do eventually recover lost jobs after a nearby base closes.

This paper will go beyond the numbers to explore how three communities have adapted to military base closures – Pease Air Force Base in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Fort Ord in Northern California; and Forts McPherson and Gillem in and near Atlanta, Georgia.

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Introduction

In October 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis urged Congress to grant him authority to reduce the department's overhead. Even if the military were to grow back to the levels seen when the United States was actively fighting wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq (in 2012), the DoD had concluded that it would still be carrying 19 percent excess base capacity. Such waste undermines military effectiveness. As Mattis explained in a letter accompanying the report, "every unnecessary facility we maintain requires us to cut capabilities elsewhere."¹

Congress, however, refused to grant Mattis's request – just as it had rejected similar pleas from previous secretaries. Instead, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) required DoD to complete another infrastructure review, effectively delaying any possible future round of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) until 2021, at the earliest.

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This paper will go beyond the numbers to explore how three communities have adapted to military base closures – Pease Air Force Base in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Fort Ord in Northern California; and Forts McPherson and Gillem in and near Atlanta, Georgia.

¹ Ellen Mitchell, "Pentagon Chief Pushes for New Round of Base Closures," *The Hill*, October 18, 2017, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/356054-pentagon-chief-pushes-for-new-round-of-base-closures>.

Pease Air Force Base, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

In 1988, the people of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had reason to suspect that Pease Air Force Base would survive the first round of major base closings since the 1960s. After all, Vice President (later President) George H.W. Bush often landed at Pease on his way to his family's compound in Kennebunkport, Maine, just 30 miles away. Pease was much closer than the busiest commercial airport in the region, Boston's Logan is 86 miles south/southwest, and Portland, Maine, while slightly closer to Kennebunkport, does not have a runway long enough to accommodate a 747 like Air Force One.

But, more to the point, Maine's congressional delegation had effectively prevented any base closings in the 1970s and 80s in order to protect what appeared to be the most vulnerable facilities on the Pentagon's long unwanted or unnecessary list: especially Loring Air Force Base in distant Limestone, and the Brunswick Naval Air Station, located along the coast, and about an hour and a half away by car from Portsmouth.

It came as a surprise, therefore, when neither Loring nor Brunswick wound up on the very first list prepared by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney -- but Pease did. The independent Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission approved the final list on December 29, 1988. And the end came quickly. The Air Force turned over the keys to the Pease Development Authority (PDA) on March 31, 1991, just over 2 years after the official BRAC announcement. The mood in the region was not all gloom and doom. One selectman in adjacent Newington lamented the loss of civilian jobs on the base, but nevertheless called the news of the impending closure "wonderful." He saw an opportunity to attract more residents after the noise associated with an air force base left the area.²

It didn't seem wonderful, at least not initially. The community struggled to make up for the loss of over 3,400 active-duty military personnel, and over 740 civil service workers. The broader defense drawdown hit the surrounding region hard. The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard across the Piscataqua River in Kittery, Maine, repaired navy submarines, but the submarine fleet shrank considerably after the end of the Cold War. Similarly, naval shipbuilding, the bread and butter of Bath Iron Works in Maine, tapered off in the 1990s. Massachusetts, too, had experienced a defense-fueled boom in the 1980s, and suffered when overall U.S. military spending declined.

But by the late 1990s, the situation in Portsmouth had turned around. The Pease International Tradeport, as it was now known, bustled with activity as an array of interested parties took advantage of its favorable location, nearly equidistant to Portland, the largest city in Maine, and Boston, the largest in New England.

By the late 2000s, the business park was nearly at capacity. The region was flourishing economically and seemed poised to continue along its upward trajectory. But a problem buried underground resurfaced long after the base closure, bringing a very different set of challenges for the city of Portsmouth. Contamination of several city wells, which originated from the air force's use of firefighting chemicals, were a reminder that base closure is a process that often doesn't end when military operations do, or even when "conversion" appears to have been completed.

² Walter Andrews, "Communities Resigned, or See Boon in Base Closing," United Press International, December 29, 1988.

A (Very) Brief History of Pease

The Pease Air Force Base started out as a modest municipal airport built on 300 acres of city land in the 1930s.³ The U.S. Navy took ownership of the airstrip in World War II, and then transferred ownership to the newly-formed air force in 1951. The U.S. Air Force's Strategic Air Command set out to transform the property, growing to 4,255 acres in total, into a modern base capable of handling the service's largest planes. It constructed a 11,321-foot-long and 300-foot-wide runway, more than 2000 feet longer than the next longest runway in New Hampshire, which is in Manchester.⁴ But the base did not become fully operational until 1956. In 1957, the air force renamed the Portsmouth Air Force Base after Portsmouth native Harl Pease, Jr., a Medal of Honor winner killed in the Pacific during World War II.⁵

Pease became home to the U.S. Air Force's 100th and 509th Bombardment Wings. The New Hampshire Air National Guard moved the 157th Military Airlift Group, later the 157th Air Refueling Group, to Pease as well. This unit focused on supporting Air Force operations on a global scale by operating aerial refueling tankers around the world. The base's massive 2-mile long runway was designated as one of just seven places on earth capable of handling a space shuttle. At various times, the base housed B-47s, KC-97s, B-52s, KC-135s A/E/R, C-130s, and FB-111s.⁶

For the most part, however, Pease played a supporting role in the Cold War – and not a particularly historic one. It was one of more than 100 major air force bases in the continental United States, but not one of the larger ones. Maine's 14,300-acre Loring, for example, hosted 7,100 military personnel and dependents, and also included one of the largest hangars ever built.⁷ In 1989, at the peak of its operations, there were 3,461 active-duty military personnel, 741 civil service workers, and 347 non-appropriated fund employees working at Pease.⁸ Local authorities estimated the base's annual payroll at \$92 million.⁹

Pease would make history, however, as the first base to close under the new base realignment and closure legislation passed in October 1988. At that time, the military counted 3,816 properties in the United States, 471 of which the Pentagon considered to be major bases.¹⁰ The Pentagon estimated that 40 percent of these facilities were in excess of its needs.¹¹ But, throughout most of the 1980s, Congress had blocked the military's attempts to reduce its overhead.

³ Tom Long, "Pease Finds Success on the Ground," *The Boston Globe*, November 13, 2008.

⁴ Lee Tuohy, "Storied New Hampshire Runway to Get a Makeover," *USA Today*, September 10, 2013.

⁵ "Air Force Departs Pease After 35 Years," United Press International, April 1, 1991.

⁶ "Pease ANGB," GlobalSecurity.org, accessed February 27, 2019.

⁷ Previously discussed in Christopher Preble, "The Case for BRAC: Military Base Closures and the Effects on Local Communities," paper presented at the International Studies Association (ISA) annual meeting, Baltimore, Maryland, 2017.

⁸ Andrea Amico, Alayna Davis, Michelle Dalton, "The PFAS Contamination at Pease: A community Perspective," Testing for Pease, June 14, 2017.

⁹ Tom Coakley, "N.H. Starts to Look Past Pease Closing," *The Boston Globe*, December 30, 1988.

¹⁰ Eliot Brenner, "House Takes Politics Out of Base Closings," United Press International, July 13, 1988; David E. Lockwood and George Siehl, "Military Base Closures: A Historical Review from 1988 to 1995," CRS Report for Congress, October 18, 2004, available online at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/97-305.pdf> [accessed February 8, 2017].

¹¹ Larry Korb, Forward to Sorenson, *Military Base Closures*, p. viii.

New legislation was required to break the logjam. Rep. Dick Armev of Texas championed an effort that ultimately led to the creation of an independent commission to close bases. In 1987, and again in 1988, he teamed up with Senator William Roth of Delaware to grant the Secretary of Defense wide authority to eliminate excess bases. In October 1988, Congress passed the legislation, and President Ronald Reagan signed it into law.¹² It stipulated that, by the end of 1988, the commission would submit a list of facilities that it believed should be closed or realigned. The list would be treated as a package; it could only be accepted or rejected, in its entirety.¹³

Because this was a new process, the actual mechanics of closing Pease, and the ensuing reuse and redevelopment of the property, seemed at times to be a case of trial and error. For example, the Department of Defense initially estimated that it would cost \$11 million to close the base; within two years of closure, however, the costs had ballooned to \$114 million.¹⁴

Meanwhile, early attempts to lure a major industrial tenant to the property faltered. Deutsche Airbus ultimately passed on a plan to build a new aircraft repair facility there.¹⁵ New Hampshire Governor Judd Gregg signed legislation allowing the sale of \$250 million in bonds for redevelopment. This incentive – and Pease’s location – eventually caught the attention of more than 100 companies.¹⁶

And, eventually, new businesses established operations there. CellTech Biologics, a London-based biomedical manufacturer, accepted \$25 million offer to finance the building of a new manufacturing facility at the former base.¹⁷ The PDA used CellTech and Business Express, a commuter service, to anchor the Pease International Tradeport, with hopes their presence would attract other companies.¹⁸ By 1997, Redhook Ale had opened a brewery at the edge of the trade port, and Alusuisse-Lonza became the second European biotech company to open shop in Portsmouth.¹⁹

Not all of the land went on to serve commercial purposes. The air force transferred 1,100 acres to the Department of Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Services for the creation of the Great Bay National Wildlife Reserve.²⁰ The wildlife reserve has drawn praise from conservationists since opening for its diverse habitats that cater to protecting animals native to the New Hampshire Seacoast region.²¹

¹² The full title of the law is Defense Authorization Amendments and Base Closure and Realignment Act of October 24, 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-526, Title II, 102 Stat. 2623; Charlotte Twilight, “Department of Defense Attempts to Close Military Bases: The Political Economy of Congressional Resistance,” in Robert Higgs (ed.), *Arms, Politics and the Economy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 1990), p. 249.

¹³ Charlotte Twilight, “Institutional Underpinnings of Parochialism: The Case for Military Base Closures,” *Cato Journal* 9, no. 1: 79-80; see also Connor Ryan, “Democracy, Military Bases and Marshmallows,” in Samer Bagaeen and Celia Clark (eds), *Sustainable Regeneration of Former Military Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 38-39.

¹⁴ Donna Cassata, “Pentagon Behind on Paying Off Base Closures,” *The Associated Press*, May 20, 1993.

¹⁵ Alice Giordano, “On Pease Development Plans, It’s Wait and See,” *The Boston Globe*, January 30, 2000.

¹⁶ Ted Hampton, “New Hampshire Governor to Sign Bill Allowing Bond Issue for Conversion of Air Force Base,” *The Bond Buyer*, April 20, 1990.

¹⁷ Ronald Rosenberg, “News in Biotechnology; Fast Track,” *The Boston Globe*, February 21, 1993.

¹⁸ Jennifer Files, “Base Closure in NH Offers Hard Lesson; Fiscal Benefits to Region Fall Short of Expectations,” *The Dallas Morning News*, February 28, 1993.

¹⁹ Peter Spiegel, “Close a Base, Create a Job,” *Forbes*, September 22, 1997.

²⁰ Steve Liseman, “What Happens When a Base Says So Long?” *St. Petersburg Times*, April 19, 1991.

²¹ Kimberley Haas, “Conservation Efforts Highlighted, Lauded by Officials,” *New Hampshire Union Leader*, October 24, 2018.

A New Airport

By 1997, the Pentagon was pointing to Pease as an early success story. At the time, the trade port had attracted 67 businesses that employed over 1,800 people—triple the number of civilians working at the base when it closed.²² One of the employers was a civilian airport.

Although the airport using the former base's runways has grown since opening to commercial traffic in the late 1990s, citizens initially were opposed to allowing any commercial flights.²³ The first agreement over how to use the runway was as a cargo-only airport, with the surrounding land going to commercial industry.²⁴ The state government eventually opened up the former base to the possibility of commercial air travel to take advantage of a loophole allowing the city to take control of the landing strip for free.²⁵ In the end, officials convinced the air force to sell the 2,200 acres containing the runway for just \$1.²⁶

In 1998, the newly resurrected Pan Am Airlines began operating the first flights from the new international airport at the former base. The company brought along 500 jobs right off the bat.²⁷ Pan Am chose Portsmouth for its new headquarters because it wished to serve areas not already serviced by other major carriers, and there was a strong enough passenger base in the area to justify commercial traffic at Pease.²⁸ That first year, the airport collected \$250,000 in flight fees, and that number increased to over \$1 million when Pan Am began operating a full flight schedule out of the airport.²⁹ But the airport had no major commercial air carrier for a brief period after Pan Am went out of business in 2004. Allegiant Airlines started running flights in 2005.

For the most part, however, the Pease Development Authority struggled to attract airlines, and in the mid-2000s only charters and the Air National Guard used the expansive runway.³⁰ After Allegiant began operating flights from Pease, the development authority decided to rebrand the airport, giving it a new name, Portsmouth International Airport at Pease, and \$11 million dollars—with matching funds from Allegiant—to freshen up the facility.³¹ In 2007, New Hampshire Senators Gregg and John Sununu secured an additional \$2.9 million from the FAA to fully finish the redevelopment of the civilian airport.³² As airlines would come and go from the Portsmouth Airport, many local officials remained optimistic about waiting it out. Some foresaw air traffic to and from New England doubling by 2020, so Portsmouth seemed well poised to elbow its way into this market.³³

²² Spiegel, "Close a Base, Create a Job."

²³ "New England News Briefs: Neighbors Oppose Conversion of Pease," *The Boston Globe*, February 6, 1989.

²⁴ Hampton, "New Hampshire Governor."

²⁵ Jacqueline Adams, "Pease Air Force Base Shut Down," CBS News Transcripts, April 1, 1991.

²⁶ Michael Doyle, "Base Town Advises 'Plan Now,'" *Modesto Bee*, April 28, 1991.

²⁷ "White House Issues Report: Community Reuse of Former Military Bases," U.S. Newswire, April 22, 1999.

²⁸ Matthew Brelis, "N.H.-Based Pan Am Plans Flights to Chicago," *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 1999.

²⁹ "Pease Has Greater Economic Impact as Civilian Center," Associated Press, December 17, 1999.

³⁰ Liane Hansen, "Conversion of New Hampshire's Pease Air Force Base into Thriving Business Park After the Base's Closing 15 Years Ago," NPR, May 15, 2005.

³¹ Emily Cavalier, "Taking Off?" *Business NH Magazine*, August 1, 2006.

³² "Sens. Gregg, Sununu Announce \$2.9 Million for Transition of Portsmouth International Airport to Civilian Airport," *US Fed News*, September 7, 2007.

³³ Long, "Pease Finds Success on the Ground."

Trouble below the Surface

As with many former military bases, environmental cleanup has long been a source of concern at Pease and the surrounding communities. In July 1989, just six months after the BRAC announcement, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) listed Pease AFB as one of 52 Superfund National Priority sites. Among the specific concerns, the EPA concluded that the air force had mishandled the disposal of over 200,000 gallons of jet fuel. In response to these findings, the air force agreed that it would cover all cleanup costs during the base handover, though it warned at the time that the process could take more than a decade. By 2012, the U.S. Air Force, EPA, and New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (NHDES), had spent over \$180 million to clean up more than 50 areas of concern.³⁴

In 2009, however, the EPA issued a health advisory on the possible adverse health effects of perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and other perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs), such as perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS). Such per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (also often referred to as PFAS) are resistant to heat, water, and oil, and are known to exist in ground water and soil.³⁵ In the case of Pease and other former military airfields, the presence of PFAS/PFOAs could be traced back to certain chemical foams used in firefighting.

Although the EPA reported at the time that “studies of exposure to PFOA and adverse health outcomes in humans are inconclusive,” the continued presence of such chemicals for many years -- or even decades -- prompted growing concern among some public health officials that these chemicals might pose a risk in the future, even if these couldn’t be established at the time.³⁶

In April 2014, the City of Portsmouth sampled several major wells for the presence of PFAS compounds. One month later, on May 12th, the testing results were released, and the Haven Well – a major source of Portsmouth’s fresh water for over 200 years -- was immediately taken off line.

In the ensuing years, the City of Portsmouth and others spent an estimated \$47 million on cleanup. The air force, for its part, reported in 2017 that it had already spent \$25 million, and was prepared to spend another \$30 million. The cleanup project includes an elaborate filtration system that will eventually pump out uncontaminated water at a high capacity. Portsmouth has made up for the loss of the Haven Well by drilling a new well and increasing output at other wells.³⁷

The community’s attention on PFOS/PFOA contamination in and around Portsmouth and Pease has been intense – and has even attracted nationwide coverage. There were at least 14 public meetings of the Haven Well Community Advisory Board in 2014 and 2015. The Pease Restoration Advisory Board, established in 2016, meets quarterly. The “Testing for Pease” Facebook page launched in March 2015 and called on public health officials to perform blood testing on all children possibly affected. Some 500

³⁴ “New Hampshire Citizens Receive Prestigious Regional EPA Environmental Awards (NH),” Environmental Protection Agency Documents and Publications, April 25, 2012.

³⁵ “Perfluorinated Chemicals (PFCs),” New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, May 2014, available at: <http://files.cityofportsmouth.com/publicworks/PFCFactSheetMay2014.pdf>.

³⁶ “Provisional Health Advisories for Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) and Perfluorooctane Sulfonate (PFOS),” United States Environmental Protection Agency, January 8, 2009, available at: <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-09/documents/pfoa-pfos-provisional.pdf>

³⁷ Brian Goetz, Deputy Director, Public Works, City of Portsmouth, NH, presentation at the Association of Defense Communities annual meeting, Portland, Maine, October 9, 2018.

children were eventually tested. In 2018, the EPA recognized founder Andrea Amico for her efforts to draw public attention to the issue, awarding her the EPA's national award for citizen excellence in community involvement.³⁸

And New Hampshire's elected officials at both the state and federal level have all been very involved in securing continued funding for testing and cleanup. When the air force refused to undertake an independent study of the effects in 2017, U.S. Representative Carol Shea-Porter introduced legislation. Sens. Jeanne Shaheen and Maggie Hassan introduced the Safe Drinking Water Act in the Senate.

Most recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a statement in February 2019 that it would conduct studies to assess PFAS in communities surrounding military bases.³⁹ In other words, what has occurred at the former Pease site may be a preview of a similar process at perhaps hundreds of other sites. As of 2017, two thirds of the EPA Superfund sites are former military bases.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The genius in the Pease Development Authority's approach comes from setting a plan and sticking to it. The board was unable to redevelop the runway land, because the Air National Guard continued to use it. Portsmouth tried to create an international airport, but the process of attracting major airlines took years and remains a work in progress. Because of the noise and light pollution associated with an operational military runway, plus an international jetport, the redevelopment commission deemed it unwise to set aside any land for residential development. Instead, it successfully attracted industry to a business port/trade port, especially seeking out technology companies.

Much like other BRAC success stories, Pease benefitted from location. It is convenient to Boston, Portland, and Manchester. It sits right off I-95, one of the longest interstates in the country. Portsmouth is a desirable place to live, and is bustling in the summer with tourists frequenting nearby beaches. The trade port itself is also only a few miles from the coast and New Hampshire's biggest port.

Finally, Pease benefitted from existing infrastructure. With one of the longest runways in the world, the idea of turning the former base into an airport was obvious. Though Pease will likely never compete with Boston's Logan or even Manchester as an air transportation hub, it is a suitable alternative for those in the region wishing to travel to popular destinations.

³⁸ Annie Ropeik, "Pease Water Cleanup Activist Wins National EPA Award," New Hampshire Public Radio, November 7, 2018.

³⁹ "CDC/ATSDR to Assess PFAS Exposure in Communities Near U.S. Military Bases," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, released February 21, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2019/p0221-cdc-atsdr-pfas-exposure.html>.

⁴⁰ Haas, "Conservation Efforts Highlighted."

Fort Ord, Monterey County, California

If you have plans to travel south from San Francisco, don't take the 101. The California coastline is worth seeing, so take the Pacific Coast Highway, SR 1 (aka Cabrillo Highway).

If you do, you'll pass tiny little beaches and enclaves popular with surfers on your right. You might spot a dolphin or a sea lion, or even a spouting whale. On your left you'll see rolling green hills, and fields of produce, including strawberries, artichokes and melons.

You'll drive past Cabrillo Monument lighthouse, and then through Santa Cruz, with all its eclecticism. Bike and surf shops, organic groceries, vegan restaurants, and donut places line the main thoroughfare on either side.

Then you round a corner, just after you leave Santa Cruz, and the Monterey Bay and Monterey Peninsula come into view. If the sun is hitting it just right, the spray from the waves crashing along the shore practically glows. It's a glorious sight.

This area became famous in John Steinbeck's novels, including *Cannery Row*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*.

But for over one and a half million Americans, this was where they first encountered the U.S. Army. They lived in wooden barracks, two stories high. Row upon row. Painted yellow with green roofs. Later on, the buildings got bigger and sturdier, made of concrete and rebar.

At its peak, the expansive base where they lived and trained stretched out over 28,000 acres – roughly the size of San Francisco.

The new recruits have long stopped training there. The firing ranges have gone silent. Fort Ord, as it was known, closed officially in 1994. But hundreds of the old barracks remain, quiet reminders of what used to happen there.

This is the story of Fort Ord. How it started, and what it became. But it's mostly about what came after.

A Brief History of Fort Ord

Fort Ord holds a special place in U.S. military history. In 1917, the army purchased land north of Monterey as training ground for troops stationed at the nearby Presidio of Monterey. Starting in the 1930s, the Army made improvements to the land, including the construction of some administrative buildings, barracks, and mess halls. It purchased additional land in 1938, and the following year renamed the facility Camp Ord after Edward O.C. Ord, a Civil War general who first mapped the Los Angeles area. With war raging in Europe and Asia, the Army elevated the facility to Fort Ord in 1940.⁴¹

During World War II, up to 50,000 recruits at a time trained for combat before they entered the Pacific theatre. In the ensuing decades Americans headed off to wars in Korea and Vietnam after training at

⁴¹ Patt Morrison and Dan Morain, "Towns Foresee 'Devastation' If Ft. Ord Is Shut," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1991. See also "Fort Ord and BRAC History," U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, <http://fortordcleanup.com/about/fort-ord-and-brac-history/>.

Fort Ord.⁴² In 1975, with the Vietnam War drawing to a close, the army stationed the 7th Infantry Division at Fort Ord, later redesignating the division as light infantry in 1983. The fort and division became nearly synonymous; when the Pentagon closed the base in 1994, the division disbanded shortly thereafter.⁴³

Before its closure, Fort Ord was one of the largest military installations in the United States. The expansive base offered many advantages for the army, including a large firing range, a fake city to run urban combat drills, and the varying terrain of the Central California coast that could be used to train for any combat situation. The temperate weather, large golf course, and breathtaking views of Monterey Bay drew servicemen and their families to the base, many of whom remained after retiring. High housing costs off-base, however, caused a strain on many of the troops stationed there.

When the Pentagon announced in April 1991 that it would close Fort Ord, the base employed 15,000 military personnel and 3,000 civilian staff with a payroll of \$729 million. Another 17,000 dependents lived on or near the base.⁴⁴ For years, locals feared that losing the military pillar of the region's economy would lead to financial ruin. Many doubted that tourism – one of the other pillars of the local economy, with the third being agriculture – would fill the void left behind. Motel manager Patricia Celeya predicted in 1989, "Marina will be wiped out, and Seaside will be hurt bad."⁴⁵ One economist predicted the area would lose 25,000 jobs, and the peninsula's unemployment rate would jump from 5.8 percent to 7.6 percent after the army moved out.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the scenic views and favorable location was attractive to prospective developers. One state official said, "I'll bet there are a lot of real estate people just licking their lips over this."⁴⁷

A draft Base Reuse Plan (BRP), released in 1996, proposed that all decisions about the base would be organized around "the three 'E's': Education, Environment, and Economy."⁴⁸

⁴² Richard C. Paddock, "From War to Peace: As Army Sounds Retreat from Ft. Ord, Base Finds New Life as CSU Campus," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1994.

⁴³ Paddock, "From War to Peace."

⁴⁴ Carl Nolte, "A Bay Area Windfall If Bases Close: Billions in Real Estate Await Development," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 3, 1990.

⁴⁵ Mark A. Stein, "Folding the Fort; County Dependent on Ft. Ord Ponders What Future May Hold Without Base," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1989.

⁴⁶ Steve Massey, "Not Much Damage to Economy: How Shutdowns Would Affect Bay Area," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 26, 1990.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See "Fort Ord Reuse Plan: Volume 2 - Reuse Plan Elements," May 1996, https://www.fora.org/Reports/BRP/1996_Draft_Reuse_Plan_Vol-2.pdf, p. 4-2.

California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB)

The education “E” turned out to be the easy part. The plan dedicated 9 percent of the available land, about 2,300 acres, for education. Less than a year after Fort Ord’s closure, California State University, Monterey Bay opened as the 21st campus in the state university system.⁴⁹ The barracks transformed into classrooms and dorms, mess halls found new life as dining halls, and the soldiers’ sports club became the student union.⁵⁰ Today, banners sporting images of CSUMB’s mascot – appropriately enough, the sea otter – line several streets. CSUMB students live in shiny new dormitories, or apartments in nearby Seaside or Marina.

In anticipation of the school’s opening in 1994, Hank Hendrickson, the first executive dean of CSUMB and a former Fort Ord garrison commander, explained “It used to be we were educating people to survive war... Now we’re going to be educating people to survive the 21st Century.”⁵¹

In the ensuing years, whenever people living around the former base began to lose hope, when deals fell through, or progress stalled, CSUMB shone through as a beacon of success. Indeed, Fort Ord’s closure solved a critical overcrowding problem for the California State University system. State officials rejoiced that they could relieve some pressure on the older state-owned campuses – plus, the federal government even promised to help pay much of the anticipated \$150 million conversion cost.⁵²

California expected to save money by refitting some of the existing army buildings.⁵³ The army handed over 5,700 buildings at Fort Ord to various groups, with CSUMB taking a quarter of those. The army also gave the university \$15 million to help convert barracks into classrooms, dorms, and offices.⁵⁴

Defense secretary William Perry traveled to Fort Ord in September 1994 to officially name the location as a new college, even before the base had officially ceased operations.⁵⁵ President Bill Clinton was present at the dedication a year later. At the time, the university had not done much to make the campus look less like a base from the outside, but they had already turned eight buildings into classroom and office space with a dozen more in progress.⁵⁶ The first students there mostly transferred from other campuses, but university officials predicted that the total student population could grow to 25,000 by 2020.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ CSUMB ended up with about 1,400 acres. Other educational institutions on the base include Monterey Peninsula College and Monterey College of Law. The University of California-Santa Cruz was also granted a parcel of land, and it operated several research facilities on the former Fort Ord for a number of years. It divested most of this land in 2016.

⁵⁰ Paddock, “From War to Peace.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The conversion of the base into an extension of California State University was estimated to save the state \$800 million in construction costs. See “Swords-Into-Plowshares Department: In a Trying Time, Some Creative Ideas from CSU Chancellor Barry Munitz,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1993.

⁵⁴ Dale Rodebaugh, “U.S. Funds Ord Campus,” *San Jose Mercury News*, March 18, 1994.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Catalina Ortiz, “Closed Army Base Gives College a Home,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 29, 1995.

⁵⁷ Paddock, “From War to Peace”; Rodebaugh, “U.S. Funds Ord Campus.”

Not everyone was thrilled by the prospect. Critics warned that the region's water supply was inadequate to support a major university.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the conversion and reuse encountered other obstacles. Robert Alexander, one of the founding staff members at CSUMB, complained that he worked in condemned buildings that the administration refused to acknowledge were inhospitable, and had even kept open after electrical fires.⁵⁹ The university eventually realized that it would cost more to remodel many of the buildings than to tear them down and build new ones. Michael Houlemard, executive director of the Fort Ord Reuse Authority (FORA), later admitted "What was expected to be a valuable resource turned out to be a bit of an albatross."⁶⁰

University administrators promised that live ammunition and unexploded ordnance would not pose a threat because the university would not use any of the old firing range for the campus. Keeping the range off limits did little, however, to prevent students from recognizing they attended classes in what had been an active military base. In one instance, the school called the bomb squad after a maintenance worker found a dummy grenade just a block from the new dormitories. "It's kind of scary," commented then-freshman Phoenix Gassaway. "I mean, good grief! I'm going to a school with hand grenades on it."⁶¹

Despite these and other challenges, university officials credit the school with revitalizing the area after the closure of Fort Ord. Universities, like military bases, do not exist in a bubble. Students, professors, and staff members, venture into the community to live, eat, shop, and entertain themselves. During the very first week of classes, then-CSUMB president Peter Smith was already boasting "I think we have a story to tell in being helpful to hundreds of communities that now have to deal with conversion."⁶² In 2012, Dianne F. Harrison, one of Smith's successors as university president, noted that CSUMB had become one of Monterey County's 20 largest employers, with an annual financial impact of \$270 million.⁶³

But today, within a short walk from campus, and clearly visible from gleaming new university buildings and residence halls, are the remnants of old Fort Ord. The school doesn't shy away from this; it embraces it. Students have been known to explore the spooky, empty buildings, a landscape reminiscent of a zombie apocalypse movie; they call this "Ording."⁶⁴ The street signs, too, are a constant reminder of what used to happen here: Lightfighter Road and Divarty (i.e. Division Artillery) commemorate units, others (e.g. Normandy and Carentan) famous battles. The university even hosts a fundraiser that includes tours of the former base buildings led by soldiers once stationed there.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Mel Vercoe in letters to the editor, "New State University Will Worsen Water Woes," *San Jose Mercury News*, March 24, 1994.

⁵⁹ "Letters; Why So Much Open Space When People Live in Garages?" *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2003.

⁶⁰ Kera Abraham, "Un-Building the Fort," *Monterey County Weekly*, April 24, 2014-April 30, 2014.

⁶¹ John Woolfolk, "CSU Campus Gets Scare from Dummy Grenade Fort Ord: Device Found Near Dormitories is a Reminder of Base's Past," *San Jose Mercury News*, September 21, 1995.

⁶² Ortiz, "Closed Army Base."

⁶³ Dianne F. Harrison, "Dianne F. Harrison: As Fort Ord Anchor, CSUMB Benefits Entire Region," *The Californian*, January 4, 2012.

⁶⁴ David Schmalz, "A Raw Look in the Mirror," *Monterey County Weekly*, August 8, 2013-August 14, 2013.

⁶⁵ Shawna Williams, "Going Behind the Scenes," *The Californian*, October 18, 2000.

Us Against You

The establishment of CSUMB was a critical first step in converting Fort Ord to civilian use, but more than 90 percent of the land was available for something other than education. Former Senator Mike Gravel (D-AK), who worked as a consultant in Monterey in the 1990s, warned the community not to fight the base closure, and urged the community to band together, and take the lead on base conversion.⁶⁶

For some residents, that was a bitter pill to swallow, but few doubted that local officials needed a group to oversee Fort Ord's reuse. When people in the region (and beyond) set about the difficult task of planning how to reuse the former base, there was some trepidation. Environmentalists worried about the thousands of trees that would be cut down, or endangered plants and animals threatened, by rampant development. Tony enclaves to the south, including Carmel-by-the-Sea and Del Ray Oaks, and even more substantial municipalities like Monterey, didn't want to see the mostly open dunes along the Pacific Ocean someday packed with high-rise hotels. They got an early taste of what that might look like when the Embassy Suites went up in Seaside in 1995, a 13-story box surrounded by one- or two-story structures. It is clearly visible for miles.

These and other parties wanted a place at the table, and they obtained it through the Ford Ord Reuse Authority (FORA). Established by California state legislation in 1994, its 36 board members are appointed by the elected officials in the area. Seaside and Marina each have two voting members, and the County of Monterey has three. But Sand City, population 387 gets one representative. And even distant Salinas, 20 miles inland, has a seat.⁶⁷

FORA is tasked with implementing the Base Reuse Plan, a 1,000+-page document, not including the environmental annex, and several addendums. One of those amendments resulted from a lawsuit brought by the Sierra Club in 1998 against the city of Marina, which aimed to block the building of 4,000 housing units on its share of the base. An urban growth boundary passed by voters in 2000 further limited how far Marina could expand onto former base land.⁶⁸

Over the years, FORA managed to irritate all sides, including both developers and environmentalists. Originally scheduled to expire in 2014, state legislation extended FORA's mandate to 2020. Representative Sam Farr, a Democrat from Carmel who represented the area in Congress for over two decades, defended the California Assembly's decision to keep FORA alive. Farr praised the redevelopment authority for incorporating citizens' views. He explained that he kept early plans for the base that included mostly "mixed use and light industrial development. The creation of FORA prevented

⁶⁶ Sylvester, "Closing Fort Ord."

⁶⁷ FORA consists of three voting members from Monterey County, two voting members each from the Cities of Marina and Seaside, and one each from the Cities of Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea, Del Rey Oaks, Sand City, Salinas, Pacific Grove. Ex officio members include representatives from the 20th Congressional District, the 17th State Senate District, the 19th State Assembly District, the Transportation Agency of Monterey, the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, University of California, Santa Cruz, California State University - Monterey Bay, the U.S. Army's Base Realignment and Closure Office, Monterey Peninsula College, Marina-Salinas Transit, and the Marina Coast Water District.

⁶⁸ Terri Morgan, "Marina Officials Smooth Out Growth Measure's Kinks; Measure E Establishes the First Such Urban Growth Boundary in Monterey County, But Argument Exists Over Old Fort Ord Land," *Contra Costa Times*, November 24, 2000.

this plan, instead giving the whole region a say in Fort Ord's cleanup, redevelopment and preservation.”⁶⁹

Some in Marina and Seaside, however, complained that the rich and famous living in Monterey and Carmel were keeping them down. When they grew tired of slow progress after nearly 15 years, they sought to change the balance of power on FORA, arguing that cities that had base land should have more votes, as should ex officio members like CSUMB. “Salinas, Pacific Grove and Carmel have no land on Fort Ord and never will,” explained Marina Mayor Bruce Delgado.⁷⁰

While early reports claimed Fort Ord as a BRAC success story, over two decades later, many people have grown tired of the slow progress. A 2012 article in the *Monterey County Herald* complained, “The region has not produced anticipated job growth, the middle class is vanishing from its landscape and housing that will be needed will have to carry a much cheaper price tag.”⁷¹

FORA claims to have created 4,200 jobs since the base closed, well short of the 18,000 it anticipated within 20 years of closure, and a far cry from the 45,000 that were supposed to be there by the time the original BRP was fully implemented. Fewer than 1,500 housing units of the expected 6,500 have been built, and FORA has delivered only 666,000 square feet of commercial space, nowhere near the 3 million promised.⁷²

Affordable Housing (or Lack Thereof)

California has long had the most expensive housing in the nation. In 2002, the Monterey Peninsula ranked as the second least affordable area, behind only nearby San Francisco.⁷³ When Fort Ord was still an active facility, many troops stationed there had to live off-base. The Fort Ord area’s housing problems gained national attention in 1985, when a 13-year-old son of a soldier stationed there committed suicide after telling his mother the family wouldn’t have to worry about money if they didn’t have to feed him.⁷⁴ The case haunted the area, and later led Rep. Farr to push for solutions.

But Farr’s demand that half of all housing on the former base be affordable sparked strong resistance. At the time, the plans only called for 20 percent affordable housing.⁷⁵ The State of California requires only 15 percent in new developments.⁷⁶ But, citing Fort Ord’s closure as “the greatest opportunity for affordable housing in the state’s history,” Farr challenged developers and community leaders to focus

⁶⁹ Sam Farr, “Reauthorization of FORA Is Critical,” *Monterey County Herald*, August 8, 2012.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Robinson, “Furthering FORA,” *Monterey County Weekly*, December 29, 2011-January 4, 2012.

⁷¹ Virginia Hennessey, “In the Wake of Troubled Economy, Fort Ord Reuse Plan Not Expected to Be as Optimistic,” *Monterey County Herald*, August 17, 2012.

⁷² Woolfolk, “Fort Ord’s Civilian Blueprint”; Michael D. DeLapa, “F for FORA,” *Monterey County Weekly*, January 25, 2018.

⁷³ John Ritter, “Housing Debates Hold Up the Fort,” *USA Today*, June 3, 2002.

⁷⁴ “Funds for Military Housing, Hospital Earmarked for State,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 1985.

⁷⁵ David L. Beck, “Lawmakers Push for More Low-Cost Fort Ord Housing: Farr Says He Will Move to Halt Land Transfers,” *San Jose Mercury News*, September 20, 2001.

⁷⁶ Ethan Lindsey, “Ord Building Likely to Have Rental Look,” *The Californian*, January 19, 2004.

on fixing the problem. Other affordable housing supporters lamented that communities only looking out for their own self-interests would never right this wrong.⁷⁷

Officials in Seaside and Marina saw things differently. These two cities adjacent to Fort Ord had provided housing affordable enough for troops stationed at the base and were known as blue collar towns. Meanwhile, nearby Monterey and Carmel, where one-time Fort Ord lifeguard Clint Eastwood served a term as mayor, cater to the upper class. When Fort Ord closed, Marina and Seaside saw an opportunity to diversify and broaden their tax base with pricier homes and new businesses.

Farr did not hide his shock at the resistance from local officials. “I think what they’re doing is almost immoral,” he said. “There isn’t a mayor in California who isn’t trying to build affordable housing. The cities are getting the land free. Where is free land available in America anymore?”⁷⁸

The mayors of Seaside and Marina fired back, citing the \$300 million price tag to safely demolish army buildings filled with lead-based paint and asbestos, as well as the fact that they already had some of the most affordable housing in the region.⁷⁹

A study by two San Jose State University economists found that increasing the supply of available homes would do more to stabilize and even drive down housing prices than mandating a large number of affordable units,⁸⁰ and in late 2006, Marina alone had plans for at least four major housing developments that, combined, would have put over 4,500 homes on the market.⁸¹

But the Monterey Peninsula was not immune to the financial crisis of 2008-2009, and many redevelopment projects, especially those for new housing, were put on hold. Foreclosures sprung up across the county, leading to a 30-percent drop in the average home price in 2009.⁸²

Today, however, the market has bounced back. Some might say too far.

East Garrison, about five miles east of Marina, is a highly sought-after parcel of the former base, despite its distance from the coast. Part of unincorporated Monterey County, East Garrison has a number of buildings with terracotta roofs and stone fireplaces built by the WPA in 1940 and reflecting the mission style of military architecture of the time.⁸³ County supervisors voted unanimously in 2003 to approve a housing community there – but it failed to get off the ground for years.⁸⁴ When I first visited in September 2015, there were a few units under construction, but few available for sale. Today, East Garrison boasts 1,400 residential units, including single-family free-standing homes, townhomes,

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ritter, “Housing Debates Hold Up Fort.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lindsey, “Ord Building Likely.”

⁸¹ Marina Heights, built on 248 acres where 210 army buildings previously sat, was to have included 1,050 new townhouses, cottages, and single-family residences; University Village projected for 1,237 housing units, with 30 percent affordable; Cypress Knolls, 772 new units with 30 percent affordable; and Marina Station, 1,465 units. See Victor Calderon, “Marina Poised to Build,” *The Californian*, November 3, 2006.

⁸² Leslie Griffy, “Burst Real-Estate Bubble Changes Monterey County Building Plans,” *The Californian*, July 25, 2009.

⁸³ Michael McCabe, “The Odd Couple of Fort Ord: Artists, Police Both Plan to Use the Quiet East Side,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 4, 1996.

⁸⁴ Larry Parsons, “Supervisors OK Fort Ord Home Project,” *The Californian*, February 5, 2003.

condominiums, and apartments. Of these, 280 are affordable or income restricted.⁸⁵ Nothing else exists in the vicinity. City planners in the coastal communities call East Garrison an “island of lights.” Seaside city councilman Jason Campbell objected to such “hopscotch development,” which puts a strain on county infrastructure, including roads, sewer, and water.⁸⁶ Driving from Marina toward Salinas along Reservation Road, I understood what he meant. There are no stores or restaurants nearby.

Another new housing development in Marina is located amidst a sprawling retail center, and just blocks away from the \$100 million VA clinic completed in 2018. A slew of big box stores, including Best Buy, Target, REI, plus Century Marina and XD – a multiplex movie theater – now occupy land where soldiers once prepared to fight. There’s a strip mall filled with eateries from pizza joints, to sandwich shops, to a restaurant featuring Mediterranean fare. And, of course, Starbucks.

On a rise overlooking the complex sits a four-story hotel, the Springhill Suites. It opened in March 2017 and caters to those who might be staying a while. The breakfast area in the lobby becomes a bar at night, and there’s also a patio with firepits. FORA’s Houlemard urged me to check out the view from the roof. From there, he explained, you can see north to Santa Cruz, and south to Monterey, plus the entire salad bowl, to the east, to Salinas and beyond. The majestic mountains frame the view.

Across the street from the Springhill Suites, developer Shea Homes is building a number of new residences in The Dunes. The homes range in price from the low \$600,000’s to over \$1 million. I saw these in January 2019, and, while they are nice examples of new construction, they certainly have a Coastal California markup.⁸⁷ According to economic reports, average salaries in the area could afford a \$200,000 home. Those who support the development claim the prices more accurately reflect the spending power of new residents moving to the peninsula. The president of Shea Homes of Northern California said the company designed homes for people in Marina ready to upgrade.⁸⁸ Where the rest of those working in Marina will live (i.e. those not ready to upgrade) remains an open question.

Recreation and Open Space

Redevelopment, new home construction, and an expansion of the area’s businesses cannot cover the entirety of the former base. As noted above, one of the other core three “E’s” of the initial base reuse plan – in addition to “education” and “economy” -- was “environment.” FORA determined that more than half of the base’s acreage would remain undeveloped parkland and open space. In the end, more than two thirds of the 28,000 acres is off limits to builders: including 14,600 acres of natural habitat within the Fort Ord National Monument, and another 4,000 acres set aside for park space and recreational use, including nearly 1,000 acres for the Fort Ord Dunes State Park. Although some area residents argued that opening up more of the land would help contain rising housing prices, maintaining

⁸⁵ Dawn Withers, “Supervisors OK East Garrison Plan,” *The Californian*, October 5, 2005.

⁸⁶ Interview with Jason Campbell, January 31, 2019, Seaside, California.

⁸⁷ Dennis L. Taylor, “Monterey County Home Prices Up, Affordability Down,” *The Californian*, November 17, 2014. From 2002-2003, housing prices in the county jumped \$100,000. See: Lindsey, “Ord Building Likely.”

⁸⁸ James Herrera, “Building a Future,” *Monterey County Herald*, March 15, 2015.

a large section of the property as open space was one of the few issues on which most in the community, including all FORA members, agreed.⁸⁹

Despite support for keeping thousands of acres as open space, however, the actual process of clearing the property has taken a long time. Ten years after base lands had been turned over to FORA and the State of California, for example, the dunes remained off limits. In 2005, former Rep. Leon Panetta, who had been so instrumental in mapping out Fort Ord's post-base future, didn't conceal his frustration, calling the slow progress on opening the state park "a big disappointment." "It's one of the tragic consequences of the whole base closure process," Panetta said. "What are obvious opportunities for recreation and economic development are delayed and delayed because of bureaucratic red tape."⁹⁰

By 2009, the army had removed about 700,000 pounds of ammunition from the dunes between California State Route 1 and the Pacific Ocean, and these portions were finally opened to visitors.⁹¹ The area includes bike paths, foot trails, and four miles of beach along the ocean. There are also plans to open some spaces in the future for overnight camping.

A much larger piece of land, with an even more difficult set of problems, is situated just a few miles inland. President Barack Obama designated the Fort Ord National Monument in April 2012, just months after Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar visited the site and called it "a crown jewel that will be around when all of us are gone."⁹² The monument is administered by the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Easy access to trails and biking makes this area popular for locals and visitors alike. Unlike in a national park, there are no ranger stations or gate houses, but BLM estimates about 400,000 annual visits, making it the busiest BLM property in California.⁹³ Much of the area is still off limits, however, as the army finishes cleaning debris and unexploded ordnance. When I met in February 2019 with BLM's Eric Morgan, he estimated that nearly 90 percent had been cleared. Eventually the army will hand over the remaining 7,000 acres to the Department of the Interior, once both sides are satisfied that the cleanup is complete.⁹⁴

Conclusion: Expectations vs. Reality

For all that has been accomplished since Fort Ord closed, it is obvious that much remains to be done. I first visited in September 2015 and returned in January 2019. In several areas, I couldn't spot any difference at all.

For example, a three-block area near State Route 1 in Marina is still dominated by old, blighted buildings. The County of Monterey's offices are situated in the midst of these silent yellow ghosts. The graffitied and trash-strewn scene is sobering. A similar patch of buildings shadows the outskirts of CSUMB.

⁸⁹ "Letters; Why So Much."

⁹⁰ Paul Rogers, "Beach Dream Unfulfilled; Ten Years After Base Closure, Fort Ord Park Still Not Open to Public 'Big-Disappointment' Blamed on Bureaucracy," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 21, 2005.

⁹¹ Leslie Griffy, "Fort Ord Slowly Morphs into Space for Recreation, Learning," *The Californian*, September 26, 2009.

⁹² Julia Reynolds, "Ken Salazar Calls for Fort Ord National Monument," *Monterey County Herald*, January 14, 2012.

⁹³ Interview with Eric Morgan, Bureau of Land Management, Marina, California, February 1, 2019.

⁹⁴ Interview with Eric Morgan, Bureau of Land Management, Marina, California, February 1, 2019.

Even in the area around the new shopping center, the Veterans Administration center, and Shea's \$1+ million homes, the old blighted buildings are clearly visible. At least a hundred structures rise on the hillside behind the REI, across the parking lot from FORA's headquarters and BLM's regional office.

In neighboring Seaside, the challenge may be even more daunting. The downtown area along Broadway is bustling, with new shops and banners welcoming CSUMB students. But, just a few miles away, major parcels of land remain off limits to new development.

The hammerheads and rolling pins pose the biggest challenge. Those structures, named for the objects they resemble from overhead, are massive concrete barracks buildings constructed in the 1950s and 60s. Poured concrete is sturdy stuff, to be sure, but its aesthetically unappealing. So, during construction, they coated the walls with a slurry paste, thicker than paint, to create a smooth surface on the walls. That slurry contained asbestos. The cost of removing this "tenacious" waste product, in addition to the process of tearing down concrete, is staggering. FORA estimates it will cost \$ 11.7 million to safely demolish 8 concrete buildings in a single block at the corner of Gigling Road and 6th Avenue, just a short walk from CSUMB's University Center.⁹⁵

In 1993 and 1994, the optimists weren't wrong to be excited about Ford Ord's potential post-base future. The Monterey Peninsula and Bay is one of the most beautiful places in California, if not the entire United States. And the appeal of the area, including its pleasant climate, and relative proximity to other major science and technology hubs, like San Francisco, San Jose, and Santa Cruz, seemed promising to community leaders and developers alike.

Meanwhile, the sheer size of the property, the largest base closure of its kind, ensured that many competing interests would get at least some of what they wanted: open space for recreation, new businesses for economic activity, land for educational institutions, and additional residences for people struggling to deal with soaring housing costs.

FORA was designed to ensure that the numerous municipalities and jurisdictions -- everything from small towns to the federal government, *plus* other stakeholders and interested parties, in between -- had a say in the redevelopment of Fort Ord. But conflicts inevitably arose. No one group could get everything it wanted. And the scale of the environmental cleanup, which would have been difficult enough, was further complicated by the EPA's Superfund regulations, and the need to protect endangered plant and animal species. And, in the end, FORA often seemed to please no one.

By most accounts, this once-promising story now looks more like a case in which competing interests have undermined success. The continued presence of still hundreds of dilapidated buildings, acres of contaminated land, high home prices that only keep rising, and lackluster job growth, are a grim reminder that the conversion of even the most promising places is rarely easy.

⁹⁵ Vista Environmental Consulting, "Hazardous Materials Monitoring, Removal, and Post-Removal Soil Sampling Cost Estimates," July 11, 2016, https://www.fora.org/Reports/BuildingRemoval/FORA_Task_4-5%20-6_CostEstimateReport.pdf, p. 5.

Forts McPherson and Gillem, Greater Atlanta, Georgia

Anyone who has ever read a standard American history textbook – or seen “Gone with the Wind” – would know that the U.S. military and the State of Georgia have a long and complicated history.

But, in reality, the shadow of the Civil War lifted many decades ago. By the beginning of the 21st century, Georgia was home to some 13 military facilities – only California and Texas had more. During the first four BRAC rounds, between 1988 and 1995, these Georgia bases escaped the commission’s knife. Indeed, several, including Fort Benning in Columbus and Fort Stewart in Hinesville, added missions and personnel.

Georgia again came out a winner in the 2005 BRAC round. After the announcement in May 2005, the state was expected to gain more than 7,400 new net jobs, second only to Maryland. Fort Benning accounted for most of these, 9,800 new jobs—9,200 for soldiers—the largest increase for any base in the country. The submarine base at Kings Bay also grew as the Pentagon emphasized the realignment part of BRAC over the closure part.⁹⁶

But the state didn’t emerge unscathed. In particular, two major Atlanta-area bases, Fort McPherson on the southeast city limits, and Fort Gillem in nearby Forest Park, were marked for closure on the fifth and final BRAC list. Within six years, most of the property at both facilities had been turned over to civilian officials. Since that time, a lot has happened at both places -- but most people probably don’t know it.

For example, shoppers at Kroger grocery stores from Knoxville to Savannah are almost certainly unaware that they purchase products routed through a distribution facility at the Gillem Logistics Center, constructed on land that once housed mostly unused army warehouses.

And movie-goers around the world had no idea that they were watching film history – until actor/producer/director Tyler Perry spilled the beans on Instagram. In February 2018, Perry revealed that parts of Marvel’s blockbuster *Black Panther* were filmed in his new studios at the former Fort McPherson.⁹⁷ Similarly, Oprah fans may have seen Perry’s Oprah Winfrey Network programming, but they probably have no idea it is produced on a former military base. There are even rumors that TV zombies roam about the 330-acre site, the largest film studio in the world.⁹⁸

What has happened at these two bases speaks to the wide range of possible uses for former Department of Defense properties – but both also speak to the unique challenges associated with defense conversion.

⁹⁶ Ron Martz and Bob Kemper, “Hit List Targets Atlanta Bases,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 14, 2005.

⁹⁷ Najja Parker, “‘Black Panther’ Was the First Movie Filmed at Tyler Perry Studios’ New Stages,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 20, 2018.

⁹⁸ Greg Braxton, “Take a Tour of Tyler Perry’s Massive New Studio on a Former Army Base in Atlanta,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2016.

History and Closure

For over 120 years, a U.S. Army base on the outer edge of Atlanta's city limits served as a subtle reminder of Georgia's unhappy experience in the Civil War. In 1885, U.S. Army Major General Winfield Scott Hancock identified a 140-acre parcel of unoccupied woods and fields in northwest Georgia, believing that the relatively temperate climates there would be more suitable as a home and training area for U.S. troops than the heat and humidity of Florida.⁹⁹ The following year, he convinced the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Army to purchase an additional 96 acres. Major General John M. Schofield, Commanding General of the Army, suggested naming the base Fort McPherson, in honor of his West Point friend General James Birdseye McPherson, a Union general who died in the Battle of Atlanta.¹⁰⁰

Soldiers deployed from Fort McPherson to Tampa, and then to Cuba, during the Spanish American war. During World War I, Fort McPherson housed German prisoners of war¹⁰¹ The base hospital expanded, and was eventually recognized as providing a quality of care equivalent to private hospitals at the time.¹⁰²

By the late 1930s, however, with war-clouds again on the horizon, the Army realized that its facilities in and around Atlanta were inadequate. In particular, its main supply center, Candler Depot, named after the former president of Coca-Cola and Atlanta Mayor Asa Candler, would have to be expanded or replaced.¹⁰³ So the army opened the Atlanta General Depot, occupying nearly 1,500 acres in Forest Park, in 1941. By 1943, more than 5,000 people, most of them civilians, were employed there. The depot became a major economic engine for Atlanta and neighboring Clayton County in the ensuing decades.¹⁰⁴

Then, on July 1, 1974, with the end of the Vietnam War approaching, the newly created U.S. Army Forces Command chose Fort McPherson as its headquarters. The depot in Forest Park was formally re-designated as a substation to Fort McPherson, and renamed Fort Gillem, in honor of Lt. Gen. Alvan C. Gillem, Jr., Commanding Officer at Fort McPherson in the 1940s.¹⁰⁵

By the early 1990s, Fort Gillem housed 40 different military operations, but the most significant of these were the U.S. Army's forensic labs tasked with investigating crimes committed on bases worldwide.¹⁰⁶ Gillem was also a major logistics hub. There were three times as many civilian employees working there as military personnel.¹⁰⁷ In other respects, however, Gillem's capacity substantially exceeded the army's needs. Its railway lines were underutilized, and many of the hastily constructed buildings were unused and falling into disrepair.

⁹⁹ Cameron Dewberry Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post: A History of Fort McPherson* (Atlanta: Distributed by the Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, ND), p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post*, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post*, p. 49-50.

¹⁰² Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post*, p. 56-58.

¹⁰³ Jennifer Cochran, *Supply and Demand: A History of Fort Gillem* (Atlanta, Distributed by the Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, 2012), p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ Cochran, *Supply and Demand*, pp. 35, 69.

¹⁰⁵ Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post*, p. 111.

¹⁰⁶ Gary Hendricks, "Marking Its 2nd Half Century; Fort Gillem," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 1, 1991.

¹⁰⁷ Bill Banks, "Warner Robins Holds on Again for a Winding Ride; Another Jolt: Middle Georgia Feels Political Machinations as Base Closure Officials Return," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 25, 1997.

At Fort McPherson, meanwhile, being situated in one of the largest cities in the American southeast, and in close proximity to the world's busiest airport, became both a blessing and a curse. There simply wasn't much room to grow. There was only limited on-base housing, and the army began to question the facility's usefulness. Elected officials, however, including the influential Georgia Democratic Senator Sam Nunn, successfully shielded Fort McPherson from closure in 1978, and again in 1993. But, as noted, his successors were unable to do the same: the facility, plus its subsidiary at Fort Gillem, was included in the BRAC list released in 2005, prompting a brief but spirited effort to save it.¹⁰⁸

Such a response was hardly surprising. Together, the two bases were responsible for 11,000 jobs in the metro Atlanta area, and provided \$671 million in direct economic activity.¹⁰⁹ Fort Gillem was the second largest employer in Clayton County, a jurisdiction with traditionally high unemployment, while Fort McPherson was the 7th largest employer in Atlanta.¹¹⁰ The indirect job losses were also expected to be severe. Small businesses near both bases predicted that they would also be forced to close, and elected officials pledged to stop it. Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue explained "We will be fighting for those folks and those jobs until the very end."¹¹¹

But while that fight was ongoing, Atlanta was also looking ahead to what would happen to Fort McPherson if the campaign to prevent its closure ultimately failed. The facility had strong ties to adjacent East Point. It ran a joint program with the local Boys and Girls Club, and also hosted East Point's only swimming pool, which it opened in the summers to local students.¹¹² Because the base included parts of Atlanta and East Point, as well as unincorporated land in Fulton County, the three entities established a non-profit, the McPherson Planning Local Redevelopment Authority, to manage reuse.¹¹³

Local officials were more reluctant, however, to give up on Fort Gillem. They argued that while Fort McPherson had run out of useable space, there was ample room for Gillem to grow. They even envisioned the Pentagon taking advantage of the opportunity to realign operations, and relocate some functions formerly performed at Fort McPherson.

They also were moving forward with alternatives, however. "Plan B is very important," explained Forest Park Mayor Chuck Hall, "You don't want to wait [until a final notice] and throw up your hands and say, 'What do we do now?'"¹¹⁴ Former Georgia Governor and Senator Zell Miller agreed that the BRAC list was unlikely to change and pressed for reuse planning to move forward.

¹⁰⁸ Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post*, p. 125.

¹⁰⁹ Kevin Duffy, "Next Round of Base Closings Threatens Two Southside Forts," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 5, 2004.

¹¹⁰ "Scott Condemns Base Closures," *Atlanta Inquirer*, May 28, 2005, Duffy, "Next Round of Base Closings."

¹¹¹ Brian Basinger Morris, "State Leaders Vow to Fight for Bases Facing Closure," *The Augusta Chronicle*, May 14, 2005.

¹¹² Craig Schneider, "East Point Dreads Loss at Fort Mac; Business, Flavor Won't Be the Same," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 14, 2005

¹¹³ Sexton, *The Building of a Worthy Post*, p. 125.

¹¹⁴ Christopher Quinn, "'Plan B' For Threatened Bases: Gems at Our Door," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 30, 2005.

That counsel proved wise: the effort to reverse the commission’s recommendation failed. Both bases were included in the final list sent to President George W. Bush on September 8, 2005, which he approved a week later.¹¹⁵

Fort Mac’s Plans Are Thwarted – but an Unlikely Savior Emerges

State legislation created the McPherson Implementing Local Redevelopment Authority (MILRA) with the ability to issue revenue bonds, and MILRA aimed to use that authority to power a quick turnaround, with a bio-science center, in conjunction with the University of Georgia, as the centerpiece of new development.¹¹⁶ As plans grew more concrete, officials even gave the former fort a new name: the Georgia Institute for Global Health. MILRA envisioned a “live, work, play” community anchored by the science and health field. The original plan envisioned bioscience bringing big pharma to southwest Atlanta with up to 7,000 jobs on 170 acres of base land.¹¹⁷ There was talk of converting the base’s golf course into an outdoor event space. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) also expressed interest in converting the base hospital to a VA hospital.¹¹⁸

“This is the plan that the community told us they want,” explained Jack Sprott, executive director of MILRA. “They are very excited about this development.”¹¹⁹ He hoped the former base could become a “hip and cool” place to live.¹²⁰ The model was Atlantic Station, a former steel mill in midtown Atlanta that had been turned into a high-end development.

Major elements of the Fort McPherson base reuse plan of 2007, however, didn’t survive the collapse of the residential housing market and the Great Recession of 2008. The revised plan, approved in 2011, scrapped much of the housing, and postponed development of a new educational center.

As the army was clearing out of the base that year, the city of Atlanta began taking control of the land, but had no prospective buyers.¹²¹ When Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed began his second term in 2014, the only thing on the former base were two credit unions that had operated there before its closure.¹²² He promised the area around the base would include plenty of affordable housing, but by June of that year, the city had begun negotiating with Tyler Perry, the writer, director, producer, and occasional star of a string of Hollywood and television hits, who had no intention of building new homes.¹²³

¹¹⁵ George W. Bush to Anthony J. Principi, September 15, 2005, on Defense Base Realignment and Closure Commission, <https://www.brac.gov/docs/PresBush9-15-05-ltr.pdf>.

¹¹⁶ Tedre DeSue, “Georgia Bill Allows District to Bond for Army Base Transformation,” *The Bond Buyer*, March 19, 2008.

¹¹⁷ Urvaksh Karkaria, “City Needs to Market Itself Better, ADA Chief Says,” *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, July 15, 2011.

¹¹⁸ “Historic McPherson May Become Scientific, Residential Community,” *State News Service*, March 18, 2011.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Christopher Quinn, “Dreams for Big In-Town Sites Slow to Materialize,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 27, 2011.

¹²² Russ Zimmer, “Tale of Four U.S. Fortresses,” *Asbury Park Press* (New Jersey), May 31, 2015.

¹²³ Max Blau, “Reed, City Council Kick Off Next Four Years,” *Creative Loafing*, January 9-15, 2014; “Board, Filmmaker to Negotiate Old Army Base Land,” *Associated Press State & Local*, June 19, 2014.

When MILRA purchased Fort McPherson’s nearly 500 acres from the army for \$30 million in July 2014, plans were already in motion to sell some of the land to Perry.¹²⁴ Within a year, Perry agreed to pay \$30 million for 330 acres at the former site for his eponymous movie studio, allowing the city to make back its payment with nearly 150 acres left over. Perry had been exploring land in Douglas County, near Six Flags Over Georgia, but reportedly fell in love with Fort Mac. He explained southwest Atlanta is “truly where Tyler Perry Studios was born and was the place where I first worked towards achieving this dream.”¹²⁵

Once the deal was finalized, Tyler Perry Studios wasted little time converting the former base property to suit its needs. Forty of the buildings on the former base are historically protected.¹²⁶ Perry demolished many of the others to make room for up to 16 new sound stages. The studio also set up shop in Building 315, a modern four-story structure that was barely 15 years old when the base closed. Rooms that once housed the Army Reserve Command are now television sets, including everything from hospital rooms, to apartments, to bars. There’s even a replica Oval Office.¹²⁷

This sale represented a huge shift for MIRLA. It had scrapped plans that called for more than 100 acres of city park space in place of the old golf course, more than 4,000 housing units, and 4 million square feet of office space including with the bioscience technology park as the centerpiece. Similarly, 400,000 square feet of commercial and retail space were put on ice.¹²⁸

I first visited the property in October 2016. We were shuttled around the base in tour buses and could see a few single-family homes that looked like any typical American suburban subdivision, except that we learned that they were built in the span of a few weeks, and not actually suitable homes. There was a massive yacht perched awkwardly on a rise of land near the studio’s entrance. It can’t even float but can be made to look like its in the middle of the ocean through the magic of moviemaking. The boat made an appearance in the epic finale of *Tyler Perry’s Acrimony*.

We also visited Fort McPherson’s Historic District, which includes a row of handsome two- and three-story brick houses surrounding the old parade grounds, which the studio keeps perfectly manicured. Perry’s studio has used a number of these structures in his films. *Tyler Perry’s Boo: A Madea Halloween*, for example, features Quarters 10, recognizable for its large porch built for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who stayed there on his way to the Little White House in Warm Springs, Georgia. Quarters 10 also served as the base commander’s home. Colin Powell lived there for a few months in 1989, before returning to Washington, DC, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹²⁹

By the time I returned to Fort Mac in December 2018, Tyler Perry Studios had finished constructing a number of modern buildings. The white and brick structures could be seen over the nine-foot high green fence that surrounds all of the land that Perry purchased in 2015. That is one aspect of Perry’s deal that has engendered criticism from some locals. Whereas many former military bases are opened to the

¹²⁴ J. Scott Trubey and Katie Leslie, “Georgia Film Industry; Filmmaker Eyes Army Base,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 19, 2014.

¹²⁵ Leon Stafford, “Fort McPherson Sale to Perry Approved,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 27, 2015.

¹²⁶ “Historic McPherson.”

¹²⁷ Braxton, “Take a Tour of Tyler Perry’s Massive New Studio.”

¹²⁸ Maria Saporta, “City’s Script for Fort Mac Still being Written,” *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, July 4, 2014.

¹²⁹ “General Colin Luther Powell,” The Army Historical Foundation, January 20, 2005, <https://armyhistory.org/general-colin-luther-powell/>.

public after closure, a movie studio prizes the ability to control access to its sets. The studio does organize guided tours, but, for most of old Fort Mac is off limits to interlopers.

Others complained that Perry had taken advantage of Atlanta, buying the land at a fraction of its true value, and without a promise of creating high-paying jobs. Although the plan included a stipulation that Perry would relocate 350 jobs from his Greenbriar headquarters to McPherson, well-respected critics said that wasn't nearly enough.¹³⁰ State Senator Vincent Fort even threatened to bring a lawsuit, saying that the deal was "being forced upon the community because [Perry is] a celebrity and because he's got political connections."¹³¹ The deal's defenders, however, including then-Atlanta Mayor Reed, explained it "would generate thousands (if not millions) in economic development to the fort and surrounding communities." The mayor's office also noted that previous plans to redevelop the site had been unsuccessful.¹³² Given that other would-be suitors never materialized, the city would have been foolish to turn down Perry's offer.

The deal left the remaining 145 acres of old Fort Mac available for redevelopment. This land fronts along two major thoroughfares, Lee Street and Campbellton Road, and could be an attractive location for mixed-use development. The Department of Veterans Affairs operates an outpatient clinic which draws some traffic to the former base. The two credit unions are still there, in the same locations that they've occupied for years. A former base chapel is now an art studio.

But many other buildings remain completely idle. A four-story, 340,000-square-foot concrete monstrosity, Building 200, was once the Forces Command Building (FORSCOM). It has reportedly attracted some attention from the Food and Drug Administration, but, for now, sits silently vacant. The old commissary, Building 365, looks much like it did 10 years ago -- right down to the empty parking lot. And Marshall Hall, once U.S. Army Forces Command Headquarters, similarly seems frozen in time -- right down to the flagpoles (some with flags still on them) and an unattended guard house.

In short, after many twists and turns, the long-term vision for Fort Mac remains largely unrealized, but Brian Hooker, Executive Director of the Fort Mac Local Redevelopment Authority, retains his boundless optimism. He showed me around their modest offices, from which he hopes to launch a raft of mixed-use projects.

The key has been, and will be, flexibility and adaptability. When the initial plans didn't pan out, Hooker and his team looked for new alternatives. And they keep searching. In the meantime, keep an eye out in Tyler Perry's next film -- you might recognize a building or two.

¹³⁰ Stafford, "McPherson Sale."

¹³¹ Larry Copeland, "Some Question Atlanta's Land Deal with Tyler Perry," *USA Today*, September 10, 2014.

¹³² Copeland, "Some Question."

The Gillem Logistics Center

Fort Gillem's redevelopment tracked closer to the original plans, but it, too, wasn't without a few hiccups.

Of Fort Gillem's 1,420 acres the army chose to retain 250 acres as an enclave that houses the Georgia Army National Guard, as well as the Criminal Investigation Division's Crime Lab.¹³³ In the spring of 2006, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) also considered acquiring as much as 20 percent of the available property, but formally passed on the opportunity in March 2007.¹³⁴ Because, under BRAC rules, federal agencies get first dibs on land made available when a base is slated for closure, officials in Forest Park and Clayton County had to wait until FEMA made its decision before they knew for certain how much land would be available for redevelopment.

In the end, the Forest Park/Fort Gillem Implementation Local Redevelopment Authority (ILRA) purchased 1,170 acres, paying the Army \$15 million up front for the transfer of 770 acres in the first phase, with the remaining \$15 million to be paid over the next seven years and the transfer of another nearly 400 acres. The parties finalized the deal in January 2012, once the Army was satisfied that there was sufficient interest in the property to ensure Forest Park could execute its plans.¹³⁵

By that time, the collapse of the residential housing market and the financial crisis in 2008 prompted the redevelopment authority to scrap the construction of new housing on the former base. It had also tried to lure a major manufacturer to the property, but this too fizzled. Instead, the ILRA moved aggressively with plans to expand Fort Gillem as a major logistics hub.¹³⁶

The acquisition of the land allowed Forest Park to address a chronic problem: an inadequate property tax base. A farmer's market, exempt from taxes, occupied one third of the city's land, and Fort Gillem had taken up another third. The city council designated the former base a Tax Allocation District, which allowed local authorities to sell bonds, with property taxes used to cover the cost of redevelopment, including new road construction.¹³⁷

They had a critical anchor tenant to power the transformation from military base to business park. In June 2014, Cincinnati-based Kroger, the nation's largest supermarket chain, announced plans to construct a 1.2-million-square-foot distribution center on the property.¹³⁸ Proximity to a major highway, Interstate 285, proved a key factor in the company's decision to consolidate operations from five smaller distribution centers into one. The company partnered with ES3 LLC, a logistics company operating in several states, including a facility in Pennsylvania billed as the world's largest automated food warehouse.¹³⁹ Together, the two companies took control of approximately 320 acres at Fort Gillem and broke ground in August 2014, leveling ten of the army's now abandoned warehouses to build the new

¹³³ Kathy Jefcoats, "Forest Park Buys Fort Gillem for \$30 Million," *Henry Herald Daily* (McDonough, GA), January 13, 2012.

¹³⁴ Eric Sturgus, "FEMA Withdraws Interest in Fort Gillem," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 24, 2007.

¹³⁵ Jefcoats, "Forest Park Buys Fort Gillem."

¹³⁶ Kevin Duffy, "Cousins Cedes Lead in Fort Gillem Project," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 17, 2008.

¹³⁷ Kevin Duffy, "Cousins to Guide Fort Gillem Project," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 18, 2007.

¹³⁸ Cailin O'Brien, "Kroger Moves Ahead, But Other Development of Gillem Proceeds with Caution," *Clayton News Daily* (Jonesboro, GA), October 3, 2014.

¹³⁹ Douglas Sams, "Kroger, ES3, to Help Launch Fort Gillem Project," *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, June 9, 2014.

facility. It cost a reported \$243 million and opened in the fall of 2015.¹⁴⁰ I visited in October 2016, and toured the facility which includes freezers and cold storage for everything from ice cream to fresh cut flowers. An estimated 1,000 people are employed there, with plans to expand to over 1,500.¹⁴¹

Other tenants soon followed. The Packaging Wholesalers now occupies roughly half of an 848,000 square-foot facility near the entrance to the Gillem Logistics Center. Kuehne & Nagel Inc, an international logistics firm, signed a lease for 406,000 square feet in April 2017.¹⁴² When I returned to Gillem in December 2018, at least four other major tenants were operating there, including engine maker Cummins, and HD Supply Facilities Maintenance, a supplier of maintenance, repair, operations, and property marketing products. Current plans call for up to a total of 8 million square feet of facility space, in units as small as 100,000 or as large as 1.5 million.¹⁴³

The juxtaposition of old and new is striking. A massive 1-million square foot building sits across the street from a handful of brick buildings behind a tall iron fence. This has been designated as the historic building zone and has been used for scenes in some recent Hollywood movies. The property is managed by Robinson Weeks Partners, an Atlanta-based real estate development and acquisition company that specializes in built-to-suit distribution facilities, and master-planned communities.¹⁴⁴

As with any former military base, environmental cleanup has been a concern at Fort Gillem. Engine oil, solvents, and rubber had all been known to have been dumped at various locations over the course of several decades, but the army didn't have a record or where. It took responsibility for cleaning 10 contaminated lakes, and other suspect sites, though not fast enough in the opinion of some locals. The state reached out to the Environmental Protection Agency to consider whether to declare Fort Gillem a Superfund site, what the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* called "the environmental equivalent of the nuclear option." And with good reason. "That outcome," the *AJC* explained, "could effectively kill a plan to transform the abandoned post into something Clayton County desperately needs: a job-creating industrial hub."¹⁴⁵

"We're frustrated that it's taken this long," said Jim Usery assistant director of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division. He told the *AJC* that the army had "done a lot of good things, but we don't feel the pace is rapid enough and there are a lot of areas we have concerns about."¹⁴⁶

Homes near Fort Gillem also had to contend with poor air quality, toxic vapors from known carcinogens like trichloroethylene (TCE), and contaminated ground water. Water drawn from private wells is unsafe to drink.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ O'Brien, "Kroger Moves Ahead."

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Jessica Saunders, "Global Logistics Company Leases 406Ksf at Fort Gillem Redevelopment," *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, April 4, 2017.

¹⁴³ Doug DeLoach, "Tax Incentives Help Grow Business," *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, May 11, 2018.

¹⁴⁴ "Fort Gillem Latest Hollywood Target," *Clayton Daily News* (Jonesboro, GA), July 26, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Katie Leslie and Shannon McCaffrey, "Environment; State Blasts Slow Toxin Cleanup at Fort Gillem," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 14, 2013.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

But Kroger's decision to locate at Gillem, despite all of these concerns, was reassuring. After all, a company that handles fresh produce and other foodstuffs wouldn't risk its brand by storing such things at Gillem if they suspected widespread contamination.

In April 2017, the State of Georgia designated Forest Park as an Opportunity Zone, which allows the city to grant special tax exemptions for companies that locate there with the promise to create new jobs. Not every company at the former Fort Gillem has applied for these tax breaks, and some applications have been turned down. But Forest Park believes that the Opportunity Zone designation, plus the new activity in and around the Gillem Logistics Center, will allow them to emerge from the base closure stronger than before.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion: Strength and Flexibility

The reuse authorities at Forts McPherson and Gillem ultimately created plans that played to the strengths of the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia. Georgia is the number one producer of peanuts, blueberries, and Tyler Perry productions. Selling Perry space within the city limits to run his company made sense, even if only a fraction of his company's reported \$1 billion in annual revenue ever flows to southeast Atlanta.

Georgia offers huge tax breaks to movie and television production. Anthony Russo, co-director of *Marvel's Avengers: Infinity War*, predicts that the film industry will likely never move back to California because of the tax advantages in Georgia, and the ease of transporting actors and crew members through Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. For Perry, an Atlanta native, the economic and geographical advantages of filming in Georgia were obvious.

In making their pitch to Kroger, officials in Forest Park highlighted the former base's advantageous positions to the world's busiest airport and one of the country's largest metropolitan areas with four interstate highways, making air and ground transportation easy.

And, so, as with any major real estate transaction, the story of redevelopment at Forts McPherson and Gillem might boil down to location, location, location.

¹⁴⁸ Deloach, "Tax Incentives Help Grow Business."